

Prime Ministers' Council of the Baltic Council of Ministers
Joint Statement

The Prime Minister of Estonia Mr. Taavi Rõivas, the Prime Minister of Latvia Mrs. Laimdota Straujuma and the Prime Minister of Lithuania Mr. Algirdas Butkevičius met within the framework of the Baltic Council of Ministers on 14 December 2015 in Vilnius, Lithuania. The Prime Ministers discussed the key issues of the Baltic cooperation and reviewed the progress of implementing the priorities as set by Lithuania for the chairmanship in the Baltic Council of Ministers. The priorities for 2015 were enhancing the regional, energy and information security as well as implementing joint energy and transportation infrastructure projects.

Security and Defence

The Prime Ministers:

Recognized the volatility of the security environment in Europe and beyond as well as security threats and challenges faced by the Trans-Atlantic Community;

Condemned in the strongest possible terms the heinous terrorist attacks on the European soil and outside the European borders evidenced in 2015, including the most recent attacks in Mali, France, Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey. Terrorism has no place in this world and is an unacceptable affront to all humanity;

Recalled the Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine, including illegal annexation of Crimea, the support to separatists in Ukraine, that are undermining the European security, and expressed support for the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine;

Reaffirmed their solidarity with Turkey as every nation has the right to defend its territory and population, and expressed their support for the territorial integrity of Turkey;

Underlined the importance of further strengthening of the security and defence cooperation of the Baltic states. The Baltic states should further cooperate in development of defence capabilities and look into joint procurement possibilities;

Reiterated the importance of full implementation of the NATO Readiness Action Plan and to continue with subsequent long term strategic adaptation of the Alliance in relation to changed security environment;

Reaffirmed the enduring commitment to spend at least 2% of the Gross Domestic Product on defence to meet ever pressing national defence needs, as well as to strengthen resilience and develop defence capabilities in accordance with commitments undertaken within the Alliance;

Welcomed the contributions by the Allies to the Readiness Action Plan assurance measures and reaffirmed the commitment to further improve the Host Nation Support. Reiterated the need to have persistent Allied presence in the Baltic region to ensure effective deterrence and collective defence.

Strategic Communication

The Prime Ministers:

Recognizing the importance of communication tools in the current political environment and the role that independent media plays in provision of quality unbiased information, stressed the need for increased cooperation in the field of strategic communication with the aim to increase public awareness of

disinformation activities by external actors, support for independent media and promotion of the best practice in the field of media literacy;

Encouraged to strengthen the strategic communications capabilities of states and international organizations, primarily the EU and NATO, and welcomed the creation of EEAS East Strategic Communication Task Force and NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga.

Emphasized the necessity for interagency meetings on a regular bases between the Baltic states on strategic communication issues.

Agreed to share information about the elaboration of the Baltic states centenary commemoration programme and coordinate the implementation of the joint projects representing the Baltic states abroad in 2018.

Eastern Neighborhood Policy

Underlined the determination of the Baltic states to continue working closely in promoting the Eastern Partnership policy and in establishing the forward looking agenda in between the Riga Summit and next summit in 2017. Strengthening the resilience of EU's Eastern Partners will have to be backed by thorough reform implementation and AA/DCFTAs will remain central in this framework;

Reiterated unconditional support to Eastern Partners' sovereignty and territorial integrity;

Expressed strong support to mobility and people-to-people contacts as an utmost priority and reconfirmed the need to work closely with all the partners on these matters. Visa free regimes for Georgia and Ukraine would serve as an important signal for societies of these countries, leading to increased support for Partners Governments' chosen road on the European future of their countries;

Welcomed the Joint Communication on the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy which further promotes principles of differentiation, greater ownership and flexibility;

Welcomed stronger focus on security dimension in the reviewed European Neighbourhood Policy, especially amid all recent events both in the EU and the neighbourhood;

Encouraged Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova to progress in implementing the EU standards, law approximation and reforms, as foreseen in the AA/DCFTAs. Confirmed their determination to continue and increase support to Ukraine in its reforms path by providing needed expertise and assistance and looked forward to the application of the DCFTA as of 1 January 2016;

Underlined the importance of unified and consistent EU's stance *vis-à-vis* Russia, condemning its aggression against Ukraine and continued deployment of so-called border signs along the Administrative Boundary Lines in the occupied regions of Georgia, which constitute a violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Eastern Partners;

Stressed that the EU sanctions must remain in place until full and irreversible implementation of the Minsk Agreements by Russia and Russia's backed separatists.

Energy

The Prime Ministers:

Took note of the work carried out by the Baltic Council of Ministers' Committee of Senior Energy Officials during the 2015 year in tackling the issues related to the development of electricity and gas sectors in the region, including 1) the development of the liberal, transparent and effectively functioning Regional Gas Market, 2) synchronization with the power network of the Continental Europe, 3) operation of the electricity market, and 4) common projects of electricity generation;

Recognized the importance to synchronize the Baltic electricity networks as agreed in the framework of the BEMIP;

Encouraged the Baltic Council of Ministers' Committee of Senior Energy Officials to coordinate actions within the framework of the Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan's (BEMIP) Working Group for the Integration of the Electricity Networks of the Baltic states into the Continental European Network;

Underlined that the fully functional electricity market is a basis for further successful cooperation including fulfilment of market opening requirements and removal of regulated tariffs for eligible customers;

Encouraged the Baltic Council of Ministers' Committee of Senior Energy Officials to continue with the resolution of the intergovernmental level's open issues identified in the Joint Position Paper of the 30th of September 2013 of the potential investors to the Visaginas Nuclear Power Plant project;

Welcomed the Regional Gas Market Coordination Group's agreement on the Short-term and Mid-term measures for improving the functioning of the Eastern-Baltic Regional Gas Market as well as the work being done by the Group in developing the liberal, transparent and effectively functioning Regional Gas Market;

Once again reiterated that energy security is underpinned by open, competitive and transparent energy markets. Full implementation of the EU Third Energy Package and harmonised – to the necessary extent – legal environment must be ensured;

Noted, that the non-discriminatory access of the Third party to the gas infrastructure should be ensured in all Baltic States to increase gas supply security, gas market competitiveness and liquidity;

Acknowledged the critical role of the Klaipėda LNG terminal in Lithuania in ensuring security of gas supply in the region and providing possibilities to diversify gas supply routes and sources for the Baltic states;

Welcomed the final decision on the implementation of the Gas Interconnection Project between Poland and Lithuania (GIPL) as well as Estonian and Finnish decision to jointly apply to the Connecting Europe Facility's funds for securing financing of the implementation of the *BalticConnector* project;

Stressed that implementation of projects of regional importance, such as GIPL, *BalticConnector* together with Latvia's Inčukalns underground gas storage, Klaipėda LNG terminal, and removal of the remaining internal bottlenecks will create entire gas supply security and diversification chain, including critical infrastructure for the reliable and diversified regional gas market;

Noted, that Russian proposed pipeline projects, such as Nord Stream-2, go against the aims of EU's energy policy on gas supply diversification as it will additionally increase the dependence of the EU on Russian gas supplies;

Requested the Baltic Council of Ministers' Senior Energy Officials to ensure high-level political steering to timely achieve objectives and targets agreed by the Regional Gas Market Coordination Group and to present the Action Plan on the Regional Gas Market development for the next Baltic Council of Ministers' meeting.

Transport

The Prime Ministers:

Underlined that the implementation of the *Rail Baltica* project as a new fast conventional double track European gauge electrified railway line with the maximum design speed of 240 km/h is essential in order to have fully operational railway network connecting the Baltic states through Poland to the EU railway networks.

Welcomed the funding agreement between the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency (INEA) and the Joint Venture of the three Baltic states "RB Rail AS", as well as the funding agreement between INEA and JSC "Lithuanian Railways", under the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) for the first phase of the Rail Baltica project. Parties acknowledged the importance of close cooperation for the successful common implementation of the funding agreements and emphasized the role of Joint Venture in the implementation of the *Rail Baltica/Rail Baltica* project.

Recognized the progress achieved on construction of 1435 mm gauge railway in Lithuania, Kaunas-Lithuanian/Polish border section, which was finished in October 2015, and welcomed the commitment of Lithuania to continue development of Kaunas-Lithuanian/Polish border section in order to correspond to the Global project definition of the railway and uniform Technical Specifications of Interoperability .

Acknowledged the advancement of the spatial planning process in three Baltic states and tentative agreement between Latvia and Lithuania on a border crossing point as principally set by AECOM study, and specified by National Planning Teams, and agreed on continuing close and timely cooperation on the cross border sections to ensure further implementation of spatial planning procedures that are necessary preconditions for development of the railway.

Drew attention to the necessity to speed up, where possible, implementation of activities on the cross-border sections of *Rail Baltica* railway, including actions aimed at operationalization of the line, such as deployment of ERTMS in accordance with the Global project definition of the railway and uniform Technical Specifications of Interoperability across all the sections. Called upon Poland to come up with a project of reconstruction of *Rail Baltica* line between Bialystok and Polish/Lithuanian border, based on the outcomes of the ongoing Feasibility study.

Encouraged Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian parties to submit applications to the second CEF Call in cooperation with the Joint Venture for further development of the *Rail Baltica* project with their respective national envelopes within the CEF-Cohesion Fund part and in line with the Global project definition of the railway.

Emphasized the importance to complete discussion on the intergovernmental agreement of the *Rail Baltica* project between the three Baltic states and tasked Task Force to present the governments with the final draft by June 2016.

Internal Security and External Borders Control

The Prime Ministers:

Highlighted the key importance of a close cooperation both at strategic and operational level, including the strengthening of information exchange among relevant law enforcement authorities in order to ensure an

effective response to common security threats, focusing on organised crime, illegal migration, terrorism, cybercrime and border security;

In particular stressed the importance of strengthening security through border management and acknowledged efficient, effective and modern protection of the EU external borders as the main priority and common objective;

Underlined the cross-border cooperation between authorities as an essential element in meeting the challenges to the internal security and agreed to strengthen further information sharing, as well as coordinate criminal intelligence actions and intensify preventive measures with a special emphasis on cooperation with the countries bordering the Baltic states, Poland and the Nordic countries.

Cyber Security and IT Cooperation

The Prime Ministers:

Welcomed the signing of *Cooperation Memorandum on Cyber Security* between the Baltic states on 4 November 2015. Also noted, that Latvia – with the assistance of other two Baltic states – introduced the STORK 2 project solutions for the needs of cross-border electronic identification and authentication. This comprised a good basis for the successful implementation of the EU eIDAS regulation;

Agreed to further develop the cooperation of the Baltic states, in order to facilitate common interoperability of cross-border electronically identified and authenticated documents and to ensure leadership in the successful implementation of the EU eIDAS regulation.

Healthcare

The Prime Ministers encouraged:

The implementation of the activities agreed in *the Partnership Agreement on Joint Procurements of Medicinal Products and Medical Devices and Lending of Medicinal Products and Medical Devices Procurable Centrally* concluded between the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania, the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Latvia and the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Estonia;

In order to optimize the expenditures, the cooperation in providing healthcare to patients with rare and specific diseases;

The exchange of good practice, the cooperation in implementing the provisions of the Directive 2011/24/EU on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare and analysis of cooperation possibilities in the sphere of e-Health and involvement into the activities of the European Reference Networks.

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Vilnius, 14 December 2015